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A Brief History of Anthropology

I have spent over 8 months in one village in the Trobriand and this proved to me, how even a poor observer like myself can get a certain amount of reliable information, if he puts himself into the proper conditions for observation.

— Bronislaw Malinowski (letter to A.C. Haddon, May 1916)

Like the other social sciences, anthropology has fairly recent origins. It developed as an academic discipline during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, but it has important forerunners in earlier historiography, geography, travel writing, philosophy, comparative linguistics and jurisprudence. There are many ways of writing the history of anthropology, just as there may exist, in any given society, competing versions of national history or origin myths, promoted by groups or individuals with diverging interests. History is not primarily a product of the past itself, but is rather shaped by the concerns of the present. As these concerns change, past events and persons shift between foreground and background, and will be understood and evaluated in new ways. In a review of the state of the art in (chiefly) American cultural anthropology, Bruce Knaft (1996) has distinguished at least four ‘genealogies of the present’ – four different ways of accounting for the present situation. Another fourfold division is apparent in a book entitled *One Discipline, Four Ways* (Barth et al. 2005), which describes the differences between the trajectories of American, British, French and German anthropology, revealing that the present can have many alternative origins. This ambiguity of the past not only has a bearing on the writing of intellectual history but is also itself a subject of anthropological inquiry to be dealt with later.

In other words there can be no totally objective, neutral history of anthropology (or of anything), but this chapter nonetheless amounts to an attempt to provide a brief and – as far as possible – relatively uncontroversial description of the development of the subject.

Proto-Anthropology

If anthropology is the study of cultural variation, its roots may be traced as far back in history as the ancient Greeks. The historian Herodotos (fifth century BCE) wrote detailed accounts of ‘barbarian’ peoples to the east and north of the Greek peninsula, comparing their customs and beliefs to those of Athens, and the group of philosophers known as the Sophists were perhaps the first philosophical relativists, arguing (as many twentieth-century anthropologists have done) that there can be no absolute truth because, as we would put it today, truth is context-bound. Yet their interest in human variation and differing cultural values fell short of being scientific, chiefly because Herodotos lacked theory while the Sophists lacked empirical material.

A more credible ancestor is the Tunisian intellectual Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), a remarkable thinker who anticipated the social sciences by several centuries. His main work, the *Muqaddimah* (‘An introduction to history’), was written in the years following 1375, and contains a wealth of observations on law, education, politics and the economy. Khaldun’s main achievement nevertheless lies in his non-religious, theoretical framework, where he stresses differing forms of *social cohesion* as a key variable in accounting for historical change and the rise of new groups to power.

In Europe, scholarly interest in cultural variation and human nature re-emerged in the following century

as a consequence of the new intellectual freedom of the Renaissance and, perhaps even more importantly, increasing European explorations, ‘discoveries’ and conquests of distant lands. Famous thinkers such as Michel de Montaigne (sixteenth century), Thomas Hobbes (seventeenth century) and Giambattista Vico (eighteenth century) belonged to the first generations of European thinkers who tried to account for cultural variability and global cultural history as well as, in the case of Montaigne, taking on the challenge from relativism. Philosophers in the eighteenth century developed theories of human nature, moral philosophies and social theories, taking into account an awareness of deep cultural differences dividing humanity. David Hume (1711–76), along with Adam Smith the most important thinker of the Scottish Enlightenment, argued that experience was the only trustworthy source of valid knowledge. Hume’s empiricist philosophy almost immediately became a source of inspiration for early social scientists, whose pioneers did not trust thought and pure speculation, but would rather travel into the social world itself in order to obtain first-hand experience through the senses (empirical means, literally, ‘based on experience’).

Many other eighteenth-century philosophers also made important contributions to the beginnings of a systematic, comparative study of culture. The most famous is perhaps Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), who saw the social conditions of ‘savages’ as a utopian ideal; but of equal interest is Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755), whose *Lettres Persanes* (‘Persian letters’, 1722) was an early, fictional attempt to describe Europe as seen through the eyes of non-Europeans. Further, the great French *Encyclopédie* (1751–72), edited by Denis Diderot (1713–84) with Jean d’Alembert (1717–83), contained many articles on the customs and beliefs of other peoples. One of its youngest contributors, the Marquis de Condorcet (1743–94), who died in a Jacobin jail, tried to combine mathematics and empirical facts to produce general laws of society.

In Germany, different but no less important developments took place in the same period. Johann Gottlieb von Herder (1744–1803), a founder of the *Sturm und Drang* movement that soon evolved into Romanticism, challenged French Enlightenment philosophy, in particular Voltaire’s universalist view that there existed a single, universal, global civilisation. Herder argued that each people (*Volk*) had its own *Geist* or ‘soul’ and therefore a right to retain its own unique values and customs, in a manner reminiscent of later cultural relativism. Indeed, by the end of the eighteenth century, several of the theoretical questions still raised by anthropologists had already been formulated: universalism versus relativism (what is common to humanity; what is culturally specific), ethnocentrism versus cultural relativism (moral judgements versus neutral descriptions of other peoples), and humanity versus (the rest of) the animal kingdom (culture versus nature). Twenty-first-century anthropology teaches that these and other essentially philosophical problems are best investigated through the rigorous and detailed study of actual living people in existing societies, and by applying carefully devised methods of comparison to the bewildering variety of ‘customs and beliefs’. Following Montesquieu’s comparative musings about Persia and France, it would take several generations until anthropology achieved this mark of scientific rigour.

Victorian Anthropology

A characteristic of the anthropology of the nineteenth century was the belief in social evolution – the idea that human societies developed in a particular direction – and the related notion that European societies were the end-product of a long developmental chain which began with ‘savagery’. This idea was typical of the Victorian age, dominated by an optimistic belief in technological progress and, simultaneously, European colonialism, which was frequently justified with reference to what Kipling famously wrote of as ‘the white man’s burden’; the alleged duty of the European to ‘civilise the savages’. The first general theories of cultural variation to enjoy a lasting influence were arguably those of two men trained as lawyers; Henry Maine (1822–88) in Britain and Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–82) in the United States. True to the spirit of the times, both presented evolutionist models of variation and change, where West European societies were seen as the pinnacle of human development. In his *Ancient Law* (1861), Maine distinguished between *status* and *contract* societies, a divide which corresponds roughly to later dichotomies between traditional and modern societies, or, in the late nineteenth-century German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies’ (1855–1936) terminology, *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society). Status societies are assumed to operate on the basis of kinship and myth, while individual merit

and achievement are decisive in contract societies. Although simple contrasts of this kind have been severely criticised, they continue to exert a certain influence on anthropological thinking.

Morgan's contributions to anthropology were wide-ranging and, among many other things, he wrote an ethnography of the Iroquois of upstate New York. His evolutionary scheme, presented in *Ancient Society* (1877), distinguished between seven stages (from lower savagery to civilisation), and the typology was mainly based on technological achievements. His materialist account of cultural change immediately attracted Karl Marx (1818–83) and, in particular, Friedrich Engels (1820–95), whose later writings on non- (or pre-) capitalist societies were strongly influenced by Morgan. Among Morgan's other achievements, his concern with kinship must be mentioned. Classifying human kinship systems into a limited number of types, and seeing kinship terminology as a key to understanding society, he is widely credited with making the study of kinship a central preoccupation of anthropology, which it has indeed remained to this day. Writing in the same period, the historian of religion William Robertson Smith (1846–94) and the lawyer J.J. Bachofen (1815–87), respectively, offered theories of monotheistic religion and of the (wrongly) assumed historical evolution from matriliney to patriliney.

An untypical scholar in the otherwise evolutionist Victorian era, the German ethnologist Adolf Bastian (1826–1905) reacted against what he saw as simplistic typological schemata. Drawing inspiration from both Herderian Romanticism and the humanistic tradition in German academia, Bastian wrote prolifically on cultural history, taking great care to avoid unwarranted generalisations, yet he held that all humans have the same pattern of thinking based on 'elementary ideas' (*Elementargedanken*). This idea would later be developed independently, with great sophistication, in Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism.

The leading British anthropologist of the late Victorian era was Edward Tylor (1832–1917), who influenced Darwin's thinking about culture, and whose voluminous writings include the famous definition of culture mentioned in the first chapter:

Culture or Civilization, taken in its widest ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. (Tylor 1968 [1871], p. 1)

This definition is still seen as useful by many anthropologists. James Frazer (1854–1941), an avid reader of Tylor's *Culture* in his youth, would eclipse the latter in terms of fame. Frazer held the first Chair in Social Anthropology in Britain, and was the author of the massive *Golden Bough* (1890, rev. edn 1911–15), an ambitious comparative study of myth and religion. Both Tylor and Frazer were evolutionists, and Frazer's main theoretical project consisted in demonstrating how thought had developed from the magical via the religious to the scientific.

Neither Tylor nor Frazer carried out detailed field studies, although Tylor spent several years in Mexico and wrote a book there. A famous anecdote tells of a dinner party where William James, the pragmatist philosopher, asked Frazer whether he had ever become personally acquainted with any of those savages he wrote so much about. Frazer allegedly replied, in a shocked tone of voice, 'Heaven forbid!' (Evans-Pritchard 1951, p. 72).

Important intellectual developments outside of anthropology in the second half of the nineteenth century also had a powerful impact on the field. Darwin's theory of natural selection, first presented in his *Origin of Species* from 1859, would be seen both as a condition for anthropology (positing, as it did, that all humans are closely related) and, later, as a threat to the discipline (arguing, as it seemed to do, the primacy of the biological over the cultural). The emergence of classic sociological theory in the works of Comte, Marx and Tönnies, and later Durkheim, Weber, Pareto and Simmel, provided anthropologists with general theories of society, although their applicability to non-European societies continues to be disputed.

The quality of the ethnographic data used by the early anthropologists was variable. Most of the scholars mentioned above relied on the written sources that were available, ranging from missionaries' accounts to travelogues of varying accuracy. The need for more reliable data began to make itself felt. Expeditions and systematic surveys – among the most famous were the British Torres Straits expedition led by W.H.R. Rivers and the large-scale American explorations of the Indian cultures of the north-western coast –

provided researchers around the turn of the last century with an improved understanding of the compass of cultural variation, which would eventually lead to the downfall of the ambitious theories of unilineal evolution characteristic of nineteenth-century anthropology.

An Austro-German speciality, proposed both as an alternative and a complement to evolutionist thinking, was diffusionism, the doctrine of the historical diffusion of cultural traits. Never a part of the mainstream outside of the German-speaking world (but counting important supporters in the English-speaking world, including Rivers), elaborate theories of cultural diffusion continued to thrive, particularly in Berlin and Vienna, until after the Second World War (Eriksen and Nielsen 2013). Nobody denied that diffusion took place, but there were serious problems of verification associated with the theory. Within anthropology, diffusionism went out of fashion when, around the time of the First World War, researchers began to study single societies in great detail without trying to speculate on their historical development. However, a theoretical direction with elements of diffusionism returned in the 1990s, under the label of globalisation theory (see especially [Chapter 19](#)), attempting to understand and account for the ways in which modern mass communications, migration, capitalism and other ‘global’ phenomena interact with local conditions.

Notwithstanding these and other theoretical developments and methodological refinements, the emergence of modern anthropology is usually associated with four outstanding scholars working in three countries in the early decades of the twentieth century: Franz Boas in the USA, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski in the UK, and Marcel Mauss in France.

Boas and Cultural Relativism

Boas (1858–1942), a German immigrant to the United States who had briefly studied anthropology with Bastian at Heidelberg, carried out important research among Inuit and Kwakiutl Indians in the 1890s. In his teaching and professional leadership, which spanned four decades, he strengthened the ‘four-field approach’ in American anthropology, which still sets it apart from European anthropology, as it encompasses not only cultural and social anthropology, but also physical anthropology, archaeology and anthropological linguistics. In spite of this achievement, Boas is chiefly remembered for his ideas. Although cultural relativism had been introduced in incipient form more than a century before, it was Boas who made it a central premise for anthropological research. Reacting against the grand evolutionary schemes of Tylor, Morgan and others, Boas took an early stance in favour of a more particularist approach. He argued that each culture had to be understood on its own terms and that it would be scientifically misleading to judge and rank other cultures according to a Western, ethnocentric typology gauging ‘levels of development’. Accordingly, Boas also promoted *historical particularism*, the view that all societies or cultures had their own, unique history that could not be reduced to a category in some universalist scheme of development. On related grounds, Boas argued against the unfounded claims of racist pseudoscience, which were supported by most of the leading biologists of the time. Boas’s insistence on the meticulous collection of empirical data was a result not only of his scientific views but also the realisation that cultural change appeared to obliterate what he saw as unique cultures, particularly in North America. Already in *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911), Boas argued that anthropology ought to be politically engaged on behalf of threatened indigenous populations.

Perhaps because of his particularism, Boas never systematised his ideas in a theoretical treatise. Several of his students and associates nevertheless did develop general theories of culture, notably Ruth Benedict, Alfred Kroeber and Robert Lowie. His most famous student, however, was Margaret Mead (1901–78). Although her bestselling books from various Pacific societies have been criticised for being ethnographically superficial (see [Chapter 4](#)), they skilfully used material from non-Western societies to raise questions about gender relations, socialisation and politics in the West. Mead’s work shows, probably better than that of any other anthropologist, the potential of cultural criticism inherent in the discipline (Marcus and Fischer 1986).

One of Boas’s most remarkable associates, the linguist Edward Sapir (1884–1939), formulated, with his student Benjamin Lee Whorf, the so-called *Sapir–Whorf hypothesis*, which posits that language determines cognition, and that the world’s languages differ profoundly in this respect (see [Chapter 15](#)). Consistent

with a radical cultural relativism, the hypothesis implies that, for example, the Hopi of the American south-west see and perceive the world in a fundamentally different way from Westerners, due to differences in the structure of their respective languages.

Due to Boas's influence, the materialist tradition from Morgan moved into the background in the USA during the first half of the twentieth century. After the Second World War, it re-emerged as cultural ecology and neo-evolutionism, and Morgan's legacy would later also be acknowledged by many Marxist anthropologists. But for now, Morgan's evolutionism was firmly sidelined, as was any direct influence from Darwin's theory of evolution. Nurture was, for the time being, deemed more important than nature.

The Two British Schools

While modern American anthropology had been shaped, on the one hand by the Boasians and their relativist concerns, and on the other hand by the perceived need to record native cultures before their feared disappearance, the situation in the major colonial power, Great Britain, was very different. The degree of complicity between colonial agencies and anthropologists working in the colonies is a matter of debate (Asad 1973; Kuklick 1991; Goody 1995), but the very fact of imperialism gave an inescapable, if usually implicit, context for British social anthropology in its first decades. While American anthropologists studying Indians concentrated on symbolic culture, as the original social organisation of the groups in question had usually been transformed, British anthropologists developed a strong interest in local politics among peoples often subjected to indirect rule from the Colonial Office.

The man who is often hailed as the founder of modern British social anthropology was a Polish immigrant, Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), whose nearly two years of fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands (between 1914 and 1918) set a standard for ethnographic data collection that is still largely unchallenged. Malinowski stressed the need to learn the local language properly and to engage in everyday life in the society under scrutiny, in order to learn its categories 'from within', and to understand the often subtle interconnections between the various social institutions and cultural notions. Malinowski also placed an unusual emphasis on the acting individual, seeing social structure not as a determinant of but as a framework for action, and he wrote about a wide range of topics, ranging from garden magic, economics, technology and sex to the puzzling *kula* trade (see [Chapter 12](#)). Although he dealt with many topics of general concern, he nearly always took his point of departure in his Trobriand ethnography, demonstrating a method of generalisation very different from that of the previous generation with its more piecemeal local knowledge and grand comparative ambitions. Malinowski regarded all institutions of a society as intrinsically linked to each other, and stressed that every social or cultural phenomenon ought to be studied in its full context. He also held that inborn human needs were the driving force in the development of social institutions, and his brand of functionalism is often described as 'biopsychological functionalism'.

The other leading light in inter-war British social anthropology, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955), had a stronger short-term influence than his rival, although it faded after the Second World War. An admirer of Emile Durkheim's sociology, Radcliffe-Brown was a less accomplished ethnographer than Malinowski, but his chief aim was to develop a 'natural science of society' – in the spirit of the Encyclopedists and of sociologists such as Auguste Comte – where universal laws of social integration could be formulated. His theory, known as structural-functionalism, saw the acting individual as analytically unimportant, emphasising instead the social institutions (including kinship, norms, politics, etc.) and their interrelationships. According to this view, most social and cultural phenomena could be seen as functional in the sense that they contributed to the maintenance of the overall social structure. Some of Radcliffe-Brown's most important essays are collected in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (1952), where he shows how societies, in his view, are integrated, and how social institutions reinforce each other and contribute to the maintenance of society.

Radcliffe-Brown's scientific ideals were taken from natural science, and he hoped to develop 'general laws of society' comparable in precision to those of physics and chemistry. This programme has been abandoned by most anthropologists – like structural-functionalism in its pure form – but many of the questions raised by contemporary anthropologists were originally formulated by Radcliffe-Brown.

Despite their differences in emphasis, both British schools had a sociological concern in common

(which they did not share with most Americans), and tended to see social institutions as functional. Both distanced themselves from the wide-ranging claims of diffusionism and evolutionism, and by the next generation of scholars, the influences of the two founding fathers may be said to have merged (Kuper 2014), although the tension between structural explanations and actor-centred accounts remains strong and productive in anthropology even today (see [Chapter 6](#)).

Fieldwork before Malinowski

By common consent, certainly in twentieth-century British social anthropology, modern fieldwork – time-consuming, strenuous, systematic, carried out in the local vernacular – was introduced by Malinowski, whose Trobriand fieldwork served as a model for later generations of ethnographers. However, ethnographic work had been carried out by others before Malinowski, often in systematic and thorough ways. A few examples follow.

In the United States, Lewis Henry Morgan did extensive field research among the Iroquois in the late 1840s, leading to an ethnographic study of their political system. However, Morgan – unlike Malinowski – depended on an interpreter and translator, the Iroquois lawyer Ely S. Parker. Later, however, Frank Hamilton Cushing did long-term fieldwork (1879–84) among the Zuñi of New Mexico, and may have been the first systematic participant-observer, decades before Malinowski.

Russian ethnographers were active in the field around the same time as Morgan (Kuznetsov 2008). Working among ethnic minorities in Russia, but also overseas – the expedition to New Guinea led by Nikolai Mikluho-Maklai in the 1870s deserves mentioning – many Russian ethnographers were familiar with the languages of the people they studied.

In the Netherlands, according to Vermeulen (2008), ethnography was actively pursued in the Dutch colonies already in the 1770s, and was institutionalised from the 1830s. However, anthropology and ethnography were for a long time part of the training programmes for colonial civil servants, and thus had an applied bent; academic sociocultural anthropology nevertheless can be dated back to 1877, when the first chair in the subject was founded in Leiden.

Finally, the work of the French priest and ethnographer Maurice Leenhardt deserves mentioning. Living in New Caledonia (Melanesia) from 1902 to 1927, Leenhardt carried out meticulous studies of Kanak culture and society, eventually published in a series of books which initially attracted little attention, but which are now recognised as exemplars of anthropological work, foremost among them *Do Kamo* (Leenhardt 1947).

What is left, then, of the ‘Malinowskian revolution’, given that he was not the first to do ethnographic fieldwork? Well, first, Malinowski described the requirements for ethnographic fieldwork systematically in *Argonauts*. Second, he insisted on participant observation, which was a new concept requiring the ethnographer to take active part in everyday life. Third, Malinowski insisted on moving beyond mere ethnography and providing theoretical and comparative analyses, thereby transcending the division between armchair anthropology (big questions) and ethnography (small facts).

Malinowski’s students at the London School of Economics included several anthropologists who would later rise to prominence, such as Raymond Firth, Audrey Richards and Isaac Schapera, while Radcliffe-Brown, in addition to enlisting E.E. Evans-Pritchard and Meyer Fortes – arguably the most influential British anthropologists in the 1950s – to his newly founded Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Oxford, spent many years abroad and introduced his brand of social anthropology to the universities of Cape Town, Sydney and Chicago. British anthropology, as typified by the first generation after Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, was characteristically oriented towards kinship, politics and economics, with Evans-Pritchard’s *The Nuer* (1940) demonstrating, perhaps better than any other monograph of the period, the intellectual power of a discipline combining detailed ethnography, comparison and elegant models. (Later, his models would be criticised for being too elegant to fit the facts on the ground – a very Malinowskian objection to be discussed in [Chapter 11](#).)

Although anthropology and ethnology were still important subjects in the German-speaking region, they were set back seriously after the Second World War, as many leading anthropologists had supported Nazism (Gingrich 2005). Regarding France, the situation is different and, along with the UK and the USA, France was a major centre of anthropological thought and research throughout the twentieth century. Already in 1903, Durkheim had published, with his nephew Marcel Mauss (1872–1950), an important treatise on knowledge systems, *Primitive Classification* (Durkheim and Mauss 1963). In 1909, Arnold van Gennep published *Les Rites de passage*, a strikingly original analysis of initiation rituals (a topic which was to become a staple in the discipline; see [Chapter 14](#)), and the philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl developed a theory, which was later to be challenged by Evans-Pritchard, Mauss and others, on the ‘primitive mind’, which he held to be ‘pre-logical’. A major expedition from Dakar to Djibouti (1922–23), led by the young ethnographer Marcel Griaule, and the sensitive and detailed writings of the missionary-turned-ethnographer Maurice Leenhardt on the natives of New Caledonia, furnished the French with much fresh empirical material.

Less methodologically purist than the emerging British traditions and more philosophically adventurous than the Americans, inter-war French anthropology, under the leadership of Marcel Mauss, developed a distinctive Continental flavour, witnessed in the pages of the influential journal *L’Année Sociologique*, founded by Durkheim and edited by Mauss after Durkheim’s death in 1917. Drawing on his vast knowledge of languages, cultural history and ethnographic research, Mauss, who never did fieldwork himself, wrote a series of learned, original, compact essays on topics ranging from gift exchange to the nation, the body, sacrifice and the concept of the person. This exceptional body of work has regularly been rediscovered and praised in the English-speaking world ever since.

Mauss’s theoretical position is not easy to summarise. He believed strongly in systematic comparison and in the existence of recurrent patterns in social life at all times and in all places, and yet he often ends on a relativist note in his reasoning about similarities and differences between societies (Dianteill 2013). Like Radcliffe-Brown, Mauss was inspired by Durkheim, but in a very different way. Rather than developing ‘a natural science of society’ complete with ‘laws’, his project consisted in describing and classifying greatly different societies in order to look for structural similarities. In this way, he hoped to develop an understanding of general dimensions of social life. Mauss never actually published a book in his own name, and his famous *The Gift* (1954 [1923–24]) originally appeared in a double issue of the journal *L’Année Sociologique*.

The Gift is seen by some as the single most important text in twentieth-century anthropology, and Mauss’s shorter studies also continue to be read and admired. Ironically, recalls Dumont (1986), Mauss, who never did fieldwork himself, spent many of his weekly seminars giving detailed instructions in techniques of observation (see also Parkin 2005). He also spent considerable time completing unfinished work left by colleagues who died in the First World War, such as Robert Hertz.

The transition from evolutionist theory and grand syntheses to more specific, detailed and empirically founded work, which in different ways took place in the UK, the USA and France during the first decades of the twentieth century, amounted to nothing short of an intellectual revolution. In the space of a few years, the work of Tylor, Morgan and even Frazer had been relegated to the mists of history, and the discipline had in reality been taken over by small groups of scholars who saw intensive fieldwork, cultural relativist method, the study of single, small-scale societies and rigorous comparison as the essence of the new discipline. It can be argued that even today, the academic institutions, the conferences and the learned journals of anthropology build on a view of the discipline that came into its own with Boas, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and Mauss. This is, to a greater or lesser extent, also true of the anthropological traditions of other countries (see Vermeulen and Roldán 1995; Escobar and Ribeiro 2006; Boskovic 2008), including India, Australia, Japan, Mexico, Argentina, the Netherlands, Spain, Scandinavia and, partly, the German-speaking world. Soviet/Russian and East European anthropologies have followed different itineraries, and have retained a connection with the older German *Volkskunde* tradition, which is mainly descriptive, as well as developing their own analytical instruments.

Later developments in anthropology, to which we now turn briefly, reveal both continuity with and reactions against the foundations that were laid before the Second World War.

The Second Half of the Twentieth Century

The numbers of professional anthropologists and institutions devoted to teaching and research in the field grew rapidly after the Second World War. The discipline also diversified, partly because of 'population pressure' within the subject. New specialisations such as psychological anthropology, political anthropology and the anthropology of ritual emerged, and the geographical foci of the discipline multiplied: Whereas the Pacific had been the most fertile area for new theoretical developments in the 1920s and Africa had played a similar part for British and French anthropologists in the 1930s and 1940s, and the American preoccupation with North American Indians had been stable throughout, the 1950s saw a growing interest in the 'creole' (or 'mestizo') societies of Latin America and the Caribbean as well as the anthropology of India and South-East Asia, while the New Guinean highlands became similarly important in the 1960s. Such shifts in geographical emphasis could be consequential in theoretical developments, as each region raises its own peculiar problems.

From the 1950s onwards, the end of colonialism has also affected anthropology, both in a banal sense – it has become more difficult to obtain research permits in Third World countries – and more profoundly, as the relationship between the observer and the observed has become problematic since the traditionally 'observed' peoples increasingly have their own intellectuals and spokespersons who frequently object to Western interpretations of their way of life. Anthropology has grown not only in size but in intellectual and academic importance, but the current situation also has its peculiar challenges.

Structuralism

The first major theory to emerge after the Second World War was Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism. An admirer of Mauss and, like him, not a major fieldworker, Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009) developed an original theory of the human mind, based on inspiration from structural linguistics, Mauss's theory of exchange and Lévy-Bruhl's theory of the primitive mind (which Lévi-Strauss rejected). His first major work, *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté* (*The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, 1969 [1949]), introduced a formal way of thinking about kinship, with particular reference to systems of marriage (described by Lévi-Strauss as the exchange of women between groups). Lévi-Strauss later expanded his theory to cover totemism, myth and art. Never uncontroversial, structuralism had an impact on French intellectual life far beyond the confines of anthropology, and many leading contemporary French anthropologists have been students of Lévi-Strauss. In the English-speaking world, the reception of structuralism was delayed, as Lévi-Strauss's major works were not translated until the 1960s, but they had both major admirers and detractors from the beginning. Structuralism was criticised for being untestable, positing as it did certain unprovable and unfalsifiable properties of the human mind (most famously the propensity to think in terms of contrasts or binary oppositions), but many saw Lévi-Strauss's work, always committed to human universals, as a major source of inspiration in the study of symbolic systems such as knowledge and myth as well as kinship.

A rather different brand of structuralism was developed by another follower of Mauss, namely Louis Dumont (1911–99), an Indianist and Sanskrit scholar who did fieldwork both in the Aryan north and the Dravidian south. Dumont, closer to Durkheim's teachings on social cohesion than Lévi-Strauss, argued in his major work on the Indian caste system, *Homo Hierarchicus* (1980 [1969]), for a holistic perspective (as opposed to an individualistic one), claiming that Indians (and by extension, many non-modern peoples) saw themselves not as 'free individuals' but as actors irretrievably enmeshed in a web of commitments and social relations, which in the Indian case was clearly hierarchical.

Most major French anthropologists of later generations have been associated with either Lévi-Strauss, Dumont or Georges Balandier (b. 1920), the Africanist whose work in political anthropology simultaneously bridged gaps between France and the Anglo-Saxon world and inspired both neo-Marxist research and applied anthropology devoted to development.

In Britain and the colonies, the structural-functionalism now associated chiefly with Evans-Pritchard and Fortes was under increased pressure after the war. Indeed, Evans-Pritchard himself repudiated his former views in the 1950s, arguing that the search for ‘natural laws of society’ had been shown to be futile and that anthropology should fashion itself as a humanities discipline rather than a natural science. Retrospectively, this shift has often been quoted as marking a shift ‘from function to meaning’ in the discipline’s priorities, and a leading American anthropologist of the period, Alfred Kroeber, expressed similar views in the US. Others found their own paths away from what was increasingly seen as a conceptual straitjacket, for example Malinowski’s student Edmund R. Leach (1910–89), whose *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1954) suggested a departure from certain orthodoxies, notably Radcliffe-Brown’s dictum that social systems tend to be in equilibrium and Malinowski’s view of myths as integrating ‘social charters’. Later, Leach, always a controversial and creative thinker, would be a main promoter and critic of structuralism in Britain, an ambivalent but staunch admirer of Lévi-Strauss.

A few years earlier, Leach’s contemporary Raymond Firth (1901–2002) had proposed a distinction between social structure (the sets of statuses in society) and social organisation (Firth 1951), which he saw as the actual process of social life, where choice and individual whims were seen in a dynamic relationship to structural constraints. Later in the 1950s and 1960s, several younger social anthropologists, notably F.G. Bailey and Fredrik Barth, followed Firth’s lead as well as the theory of games (a then recent development in economics) in refining an actor-centred perspective on social life, where the formerly paramount level of norms and social institutions were re-framed as contextual variables (or even, as in a programmatic statement by Barth, as unintended consequences of intentional action). Following a different itinerary, Max Gluckman (1911–75), a former pupil of Radcliffe-Brown and a close associate of Evans-Pritchard, also increasingly abandoned the strong holist programme of the structural-functionalists, reconceptualising social structure as a rather loose set of constraints, while emphasising the importance of individual actors. Gluckman’s collaborators included a number of important Africanists, such as A.L. Epstein, J. Clyde Mitchell, Victor Turner and Elizabeth Colson. Working in Southern Africa, this group pioneered both urban anthropology and the study of ethnicity in the 1950s and 1960s (see [Chapters 16–17](#)).

Neo-Evolutionism, Cultural Ecology and Neo-Marxism

The number of practising anthropologists has always been larger in the United States than anywhere else. In 2003, the Association of Social Anthropologists in the UK had a membership of slightly over 500, while the American Anthropological Association had nearly 12,000 members (Mills 2003, p. 13). Although the population of the USA is only six times that of Britain, there are 24 times as many anthropologists who are members of the main professional organisation. Although the influence from the Boasian cultural relativist school remains strong in US anthropology to this day, other theoretical trends have also made their mark. From the late 1940s onwards, a resurgent interest in Morgan’s evolutionism as well as Marxism led to the formulation of several non-Boasian, evolutionist and materialist research programmes. Julian Steward (1902–72), a student of Robert Redfield at Chicago (who had himself been a student of Radcliffe-Brown), proposed a theory of cultural dynamics where he distinguished between ‘the cultural core’ (basic institutions such as the division of labour) and ‘the rest of culture’ in a way strongly reminiscent of Marx, an influence which could not be acknowledged openly at the time, however, because of the persecution of ‘Communists’ in the USA of the 1950s. Steward directed research projects and supervised work among Latin American peasants as well as North American Indians, and encouraged a renewed focus on the relationship between culture, technology and the environment. His contemporary Leslie White (1900–75) held views that were more deterministic than Steward’s (who allowed for major local variations), but also – perhaps oddly – saw symbolic culture as a largely autonomous realm (cf. Sahlins 1976; see also [Chapter 13](#)). Among the major scholars influenced by White, Marvin Harris retained the materialist determinism in his own theory, called cultural materialism (Harris 1979), while Marshall Sahlins in the 1960s made the move from a kind of neo-evolutionism to a symbolic anthropology influenced by structuralism (Sahlins 1976).

Cultural ecology, largely a North American speciality, sprang from the teachings of Steward and White, and led to some rare collaborations between anthropology and biology. Especially in the 1960s, many such studies were carried out, including Roy Rappaport's *Pigs for the Ancestors* (1968), an attempt to account for a recurrent ritual in the New Guinean highlands in ecological terms. However, the upsurge of Marxist peasant research, especially in Latin America, in the 1970s, was largely indebted to Steward.

The advent of radical student politics in the late 1960s, which continued to have an impact on academia until the early 1980s, had a strong, if passing, influence on anthropology virtually everywhere. Of the more lasting contributions, apart from the historically informed peasant studies initiated by Steward and furthered by Eric Wolf, Sidney Mintz and others, the French attempt at synthesising Lévi-Straussian structuralism, Althusserian Marxism and anthropological relativism must be mentioned here. Emmanuel Terray, Claude Meillassoux and, probably most importantly, Maurice Godelier were among those who tried to combine a concern with local conditions and a universalist, ultimately evolutionist theory of society. Although both Marxism and structuralism eventually became unfashionable, many anthropologists continue to draw inspiration from Marxist thought.

Symbolic and Cognitive Anthropology

More true to the tenor of the Boasian legacy than the materialist approaches, studies of cognition and symbolic systems have developed and diversified enormously in the decades after the Second World War. A leading theorist was Clifford Geertz, who wrote a string of influential essays advocating hermeneutics (interpretive method) in the 1960s and 1970s. While his originality as a theorist can be questioned (possible precursors include the philosopher Paul Ricœur, whose influence Geertz acknowledges, as well as Evans-Pritchard and Malinowski himself), his quality as a writer is beyond dispute, and Geertz ranks among the finest writers in contemporary anthropology. His contemporary Sahlins is, along with Geertz (who died in 2006), the foremost proponent of cultural relativism in the early twenty-first century, and his work includes studies of Mauss's theory of exchange, a critique of sociobiology and an examination of the cultural circumstances surrounding the death of Captain Cook (see [Chapter 15](#)), consistently stressing the autonomy of the symbolic realm, thus arguing that cultural variation cannot be explained by recourse to material conditions or inborn biological properties of humans.

In British anthropology, too, interest in meaning, symbols and cognition grew perceptibly after the war, especially from the 1960s (partly due to the belated discovery of Lévi-Strauss). British social anthropology had until then been strongly sociological, and two scholars who fused the legacy from structural-functionalism with the study of symbols and meaning in outstanding ways, were Mary Douglas (1921–2007) and Victor Turner (1920–83). Taking his cue from van Gennep, Turner, a former associate of Gluckman, developed a complex analysis of initiation rituals among the Ndembu of Zambia, showing simultaneously their functionally integrating aspects, their meaningful aspects for the participants and their deeper symbolic significance. Douglas, a student of Evans-Pritchard and famous for her *Purity and Danger* (1966), analysed the human preoccupation with dirt and impurities as an indirect way of thinking about the boundaries of society and the nature/culture divide, thus joining the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss with that of Radcliffe-Brown, so to speak. Prolific and consistent, Douglas was for years the most prominent defender of a reformed structural-functionalism (Douglas 1987; see also [Chapter 6](#)).

Against all of these (and other) perspectives regarding how 'cultures' or 'societies' perceive the world, anthropologists stressing the actor's point of view have argued that no two individuals see the world in the same way and that it is therefore preposterous to generalise about entire societies. The impact of feminism has been decisive here. Since the 1970s, feminist anthropologists have identified often profound differences between male and female world-views, showing how classic accounts of 'societies' really refer to male perspectives on them as both the anthropologist and the main informants tended to be male (Ardener 1977). In a different vein, Fredrik Barth, who had earlier criticised structural-functionalism from a processual perspective, developed analyses of knowledge systems in New Guinea and Bali (Barth 1975, 1993; see [Chapter 6](#)) which revealed considerable variations within societies, even very small ones. A more radical critique came from the United States, especially following the publication of the influential volume *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), where most of the contributors argued that notions of

cultural wholes and integrated societies were anthropological fictions, claiming that the real world was much more complex and ambiguous than anthropological writings would tend to suggest. These and other publications contributed to a sense of crisis in the discipline in the 1980s and early 1990s, as some of its central concepts, including that of culture, were under severe strain.

Although symbolic anthropology often emphasises the culturally unique and thereby defends a relativist position, this sometimes conceals a deeper universalism. The most influential theory in linguistics during the latter half of the twentieth century was Noam Chomsky's generative grammar, which stressed the similarities between all languages. Even strong relativist positions need a notion of the universal in order to make comparisons. This universal is ultimately located to the human mind in structuralism and many varieties of cognitive anthropology (see D'Andrade 1995), and from this perspective, it can even be said that the relativity of cultures is merely a surface phenomenon since the mind works in the same way everywhere.

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Anthropology in the twenty-first century is a sprawling and varied discipline; it has an academic foothold in all continents, with large anthropological communities in countries like Brazil, Japan and Russia, although its intellectual centres remain in the English- and French-speaking parts of the world. It is still possible to discern differences between American cultural anthropology, British social anthropology and French *ethnologie*, but the discipline is more unified than ever before — not in its views, perhaps, but in its approaches (Eriksen and Nielsen 2013). Hardly a part of the world has not now been studied intensively by scholars engaging in ethnographic fieldwork, but since the world changes, new research is always called for. Specialisations proliferate, ranging from studies of ethnomedicine and the body to urban consumer culture, advertising and online cultures. Although the grand theories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries — from unilinear evolutionism to structuralism — have by and large been abandoned, new theories claiming to provide a unified view of humanity are being proposed; for example, new advances in evolutionary theory and cognitive science offer ambitious general accounts of social life and the human mind, respectively. The puzzles and problems confronting earlier generations of anthropologists, regarding, for example, the nature of social organisation, of knowledge, of kinship, of myth and ritual, remain central to the discipline, although they are explored in new empirical settings by scholars who are more specialised than their predecessors.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Fredrik Barth, Andre Gingrich, Robert Parkin and Sydel Silverman: *One Discipline, Four Ways: British, German, French, and American Anthropology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2005.

Aleksandar Boskovic, ed.: *Other People's Anthropologies*. Oxford: Berghahn 2008.

Paul A. Erickson and Liam D. Murphy: *A History of Anthropological Theory*, 4th edition. Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2013.